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Beyond Islamic Roots: Beyond Modernism

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 43, Islamic Arts (Spring, 2003), pp. 175-186

Published by: [The President and Fellows of Harvard College](#) acting through the [Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20167597>

Accessed: 25/01/2012 18:45

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Beyond Islamic roots—beyond Modernism

FERESHTEH DAFTARI

Islamic art has long affected Western art and continues to do so today. Its impact on European modern artists has been widely recognized; Henri Matisse, Paul Klee, and Wassily Kandinsky are prime examples of artists for whom the creators of miniatures, calligraphy, ceramics, carpets, and metalwork were historical accomplices, giving them the confidence to break new ground in their iconographies and styles and helping them along in their spiritual and aesthetic choices.¹ Today, a new phenomenon is becoming apparent: many artists who draw on Islamic art actually originate in its lands but now are rooted in the West. These artists are extending the Islamic vocabulary beyond its original framework, developing new narratives that reconfigure and subvert the original idioms. At the same time, they also defy the assumptions of modernism. A complex interaction is at work, then: the platform from which artists such as Ghada Amer, Shahzia Sikander, and Shirazeh Houshiary operate involves a deviance from both the Islamic and the modernist canons. Refusing to “represent” their cultures in a Western framework, these artists also shun homogenization into a purely Western aesthetic language. They speak in a multivocal polyphony marked with a mixture of accents. Elusive or transparent, the Islamic references are retained only to be superseded or altered, sometimes unrecognizably. Importantly, gender, when addressed, creates a space of observation equally unsparing to those Islamic cultures with a narrow vision of women, as to the myopic Western perception of the veil, for instance, as well as to modernism’s own sins of

female exclusion. Two of the three artists considered in this study resist stereotypes fabricated in any corner of the world, and Houshiary, the third artist, steps above gender and other divisive concepts altogether toward what binds and consolidates our common humanity. To expand our sense of the meaning of their work we must examine both the places where these artists are anchored and where they break loose and wander free.

Ghada Amer

Ghada Amer’s best-known works have the least apparent connection to any Islamic tradition: they are stitched and embroidered canvases that appear from a distance as drip paintings recalling Abstract Expressionism, but that invite a double reading, revealing images of female auto-eroticism when viewed at closer range (fig. 1). Amer can easily be situated with a group of artists who dismantle such modernist idioms as Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism—Janine Antoni and Sue Williams, for example. Yet to understand the extent of her audacity and the range of her references one needs to look not only within Western parameters but outside them as well.

Amer left Cairo for France when she was eleven. Her first experience of her difference concerned her appearance: desperate to fit, she has explained “I did everything to look like the others.”² More importantly, what started her on her path as a “seamstress” artist, adopting the needle instead of a brush, were the Egyptian fashion magazines in which imported Western models were altered and Islamicized. A head scarf added here, a hem line elongated there, or a décolleté covered—changes like these transformed the European prototypes into Islam-approved models. Amer’s early bifocal attention, in reality a measure of cultural distance, persists in her work to this day. Its beginnings may be sought in a series of actions she staged in Paris with an artist friend, Ladan Naderi: donning the veil, the two women surfaced in a variety of situations, attending art openings and having themselves photographed in front of iconic monuments such as the Eiffel Tower. In 1992, these photographs were exhibited as a series entitled “I Love Paris” at the city’s Hôpital Ephémère.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Ghada Amer, Shahzia Sikander, and Shirazeh Houshiary for sharing their thoughts and precious studio time with me. I am equally thankful to their galleries: Deitch Projects and Brent Sikkema in New York, Lisson Gallery in London. I am especially grateful to Elly Ketsea at the Lisson Gallery. Finally my heartfelt thanks go to David Frankel who is a superb editor and a great friend.

1. On the affinities between Islamic art and modernism, see Markus Bröderlin, ed., *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between Non-Western, Modern and Contemporary Art* (Riehen-Basel: Fondation Beyeler and Cologne: Du Mont, 2001). On the influence of Islamic art in the West, and, more specifically, on the connections among Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, and “Persian” art, see Fereshteh Daftari, *The Influence of Persian Art on Gauguin, Matisse, and Kandinsky* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1991).

2. Ghada Amer, quoted in an interview with Xavier Franceschi, in *Ghada Amer* (Brétigny-sur-Orge: Espace Jules Verne, 1994), n.p.

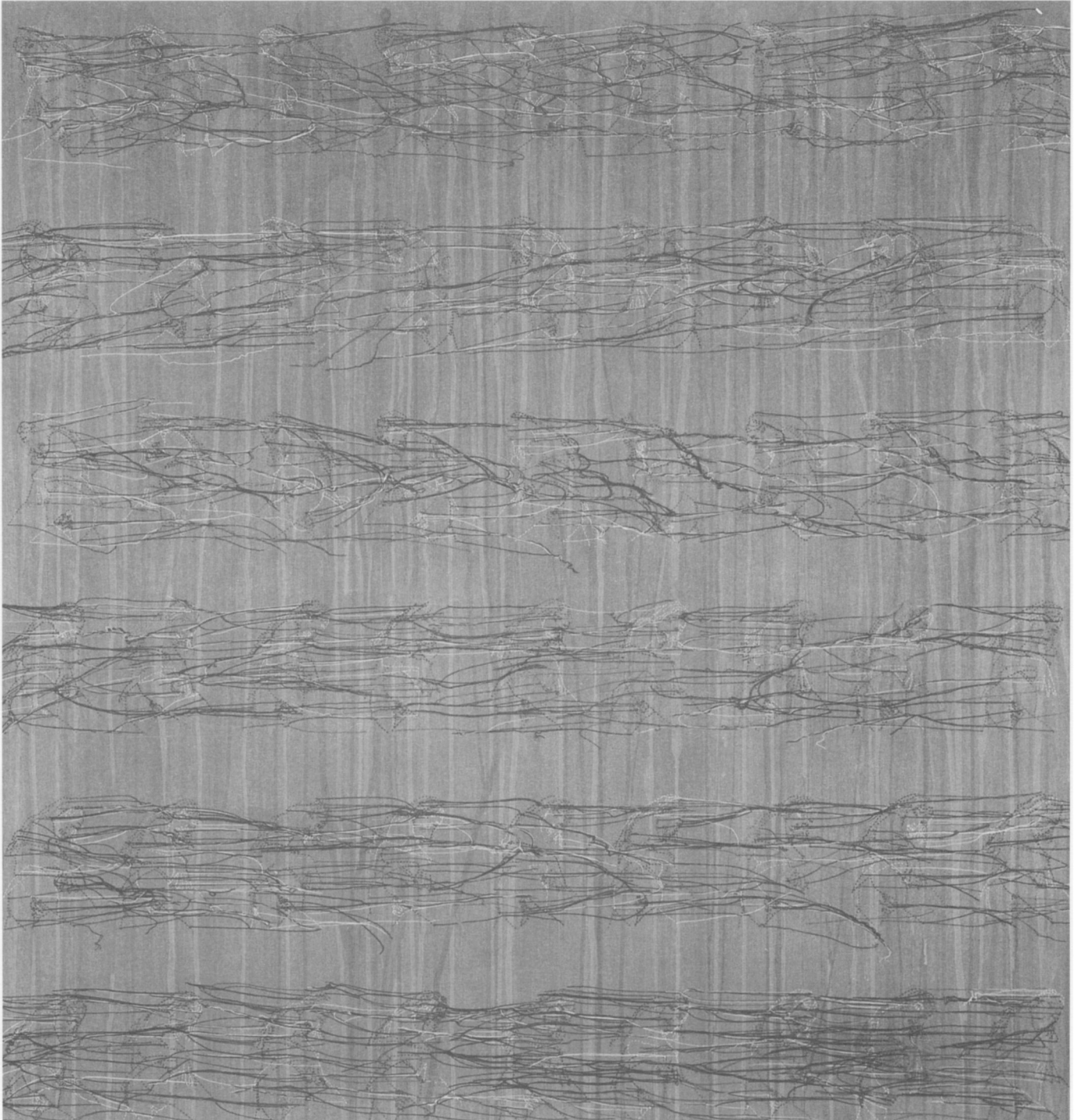


Figure 1. Ghada Amer, *The Sad Painting/Diane*, 2001. Acrylic, embroidery, and gel medium on canvas (52 x 50"). Courtesy of the artist and Deitch Projects, New York.

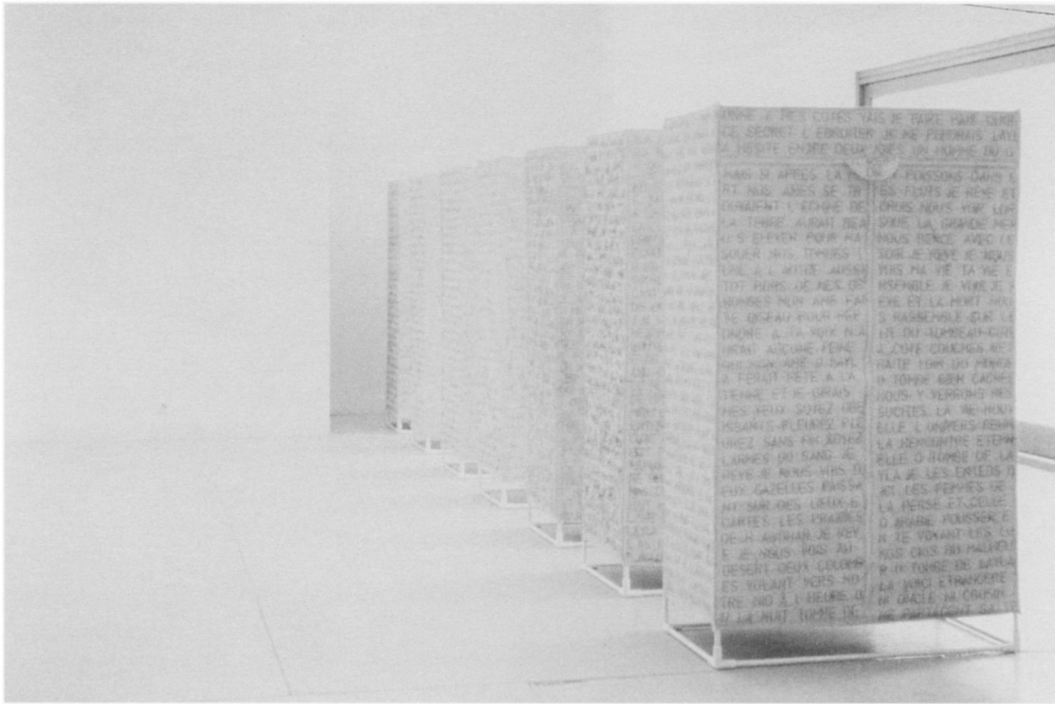


Figure 2. Ghada Amer, *Majnun*, 1995–1997. Embroidery on seven plastic storage closets. Each closet: 64 x 69". Courtesy of FNAC & Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur.

There was a guest book in which viewers could record their reactions, which were overwhelmingly negative. This gave the exhibition a conclusive point: "Muslim women were not the subject of the message," asserts the artist, "the perception of them was."³

It was around this time that Amer turned her attention to the written or, rather, embroidered text. She at first chose a crude, coarse, rough execution and banal material—recipes, beauty tips lifted from magazines like *Marie Claire* and *Madame*, a straightforward definition of love drawn from the Petit Robert dictionary, all stitched in shaggy capital letters. The mundanity of these texts, and of course the Roman alphabet, distanced her from the aestheticized art of Islamic calligraphy, and especially from its historical splendor when applied in the service of religion.⁴ Amer's works are the antithesis to the meticulously cared-for calligraphic page. She used heavyhanded stitching and let the loose threads dangle,

3. Interview with author, April 2001.

4. On this subject see, e.g., Priscilla P. Soucek, "The Arts of Calligraphy," in Basil Gray, ed., *The Arts of the Book in Central Asia: 14th–16th Centuries* (Boulder, Colo.: Shambhala; Paris, France: UNESCO, 1979), pp. 7–34.

evoking the allover drips of Abstract Expressionism and also, perhaps, the reverse side of a highly finished sartorial item. Neither a forum for patriarchal voices nor an arena for the usually male gestural expression of modernist abstraction, the territory Amer marks out in her work is that of an average female with modest interests. She approaches her material with the intention to elevate the disparaged and the feminine.

Beginning in 1995 Amer switched to Arabic texts. Except in a work in which the Arabic word for "fear" is embroidered on a *borqa*, the cloth garment that separates a Muslim woman's face from the world, she draws her texts from French translations of Arabic, not from the original Arabic. Translation necessarily involves a foreign, intermediary gaze into a culture, and this is a powerful element in Amer's experience; as a young Egyptian living abroad, first in France and then the United States, she has constantly had to reformulate and revise her idea of her origin, first to herself, then rephrasing it to others.

Majnun (1995–1997; fig. 2) is Amer's first venture into the use of literary sources. The tale on which it is based, *Layla and Majnun*, is "perhaps the most popular

romance in the Islamic world,"⁵ a passionate, tragic story of doomed and unrequited love that predates Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, to which it is often compared, and has inspired many Arab, Persian, and Turkish authors. Rather than following an erudite edition of the text, Amer has based her version on a French translation of short, digestible excerpts by an unnamed author.⁶ We are still in the domain of sentimental interest recognizable to the reader of *Marie Claire*. The selections she quotes—Majnun's effusions of desire and longing for death—deliver florid medieval poetry, but she detaches them both from the venerated art of calligraphy and from traditional representations, in the numerous miniatures where the emaciated Majnun, estranged from society, roams the wilderness in the company of wild animals. In Amer's version the words are embroidered in capital letters on seven storage boxes, sites of suspended, tucked-away life that recall another kind of exile, a modern state of homelessness and deracination. Amer also asserts the rupture with the past in another way: she lodges the lyrical excesses of the Oriental Majnun within a Western modernist vocabulary, for the shapes of the storage boxes evoke the geometries of Minimalism. Anachronistically applied to white cubes, the verbiage violates and contaminates the exigencies of pure abstraction. A rebel within her culture, an intruder into another, Amer perverts all traditions, affirming her unattached alien condition.

The next text Amer approached was the Koran. Still using a French translation, she carefully searched for suras in any way relating to women. If, in *Majnun*, Layla remains absent except through Majnun's emotions, in the Koran a woman's whole existence is constructed, ruled, regulated, and defined from above. By following the representation of women through these literary and sacred prisms, Amer pursued her interest in the way gender is pieced together.

Having examined the sacred Amer moved on to the profane. Scanning love in both the Western and the Arab worlds, she has studied all shades of the spectrum from the carnal to the chaste, from Hollywood to Cairo, from pornography to serious erotic taxonomy. Her first works on this subject, a genre she continues to this day, were those involving the image of a self-stimulating

female nude (fig. 1). Then, in an installation from 1999 entitled *Love Park*, she switched to the textual counterpart of sexual explicitness, inscribing on signposts quotations from the sixteenth-century text *The Perfumed Garden*, by Shaykh Nefzawi.⁷ A more recent installation, from 2001, takes its title from an Arabic text called *Jawami al-ladhdha*, or *The Encyclopaedia of Pleasure* (fig. 3). The text is now little known, but such literature was once in no way clandestine; erotic literature has enjoyed great popularity in the Arab world, and the earliest extant treatise dates back to the ninth century.⁸ The text Amer had used earlier, Shaykh Nefzawi's *The Perfumed Garden*, is itself just such a treatise and begins, "Praise be given to God, who has placed man's greatest pleasure in the natural parts of woman, and has destined the natural parts of man to afford the greatest enjoyment to woman." To defer to God, or bow to established authority, and then move on to sex is a strategy that is not unfamiliar to Amer, as we shall see.

The *Jawami al-ladhdha*, written by Abul Hasan Ali Ibn al Katib, has never been published in English, only translated for a thesis by Salah addin Khawwam in Aleppo, in 1974.⁹ As she did with *Majnun*, in *The Encyclopaedia of Pleasure* Amer has inscribed the text on white cubes, once again asserting a link with Minimalism but also conjuring piled-up storage boxes and evoking an atmosphere of deferred settlement or nomadism. The text's many subjects range from pederasty to jealousy, from aphrodisiacs to remedies for impotence; Amer has woven those sections that speak of women, writing in golden thread and in capital letters. From a chapter concerned with female sexuality at various ages, for example, she chooses a passage regarding a man's desire to buy a bondmaid he wishes was over twenty. The bondmaid hearing the remark answered:

Didn't you hear the following verses:
Pleasurable girls range from ten
To twenty and lo! Not above twenty,
If you want to have a girl above twenty,
Go up only a little bit higher,

7. See Shaykh Nefzawi, *The Perfumed Garden*, trans. Sir Richard F. Burton (New York: Castle Books, 1964). Amer titled the series of signposts *Love Park* and exhibited them in SITE Santa Fe.

8. For a brief history of this subject see Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

9. Amer came into possession of the manuscript through a photocopy sent to her by her sister, a professor of medieval French literature.

5. See Peter J. Chelkowsky's "Commentary" on "Layla and Majnun" in *Mirror of the Invisible World: Tales from the Khamseh of Nizami* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975), p. 66.

6. André Miquel. *Majnun, L'amour poème* (Paris: Sindbad [La bibliothèque arabe], 1984).

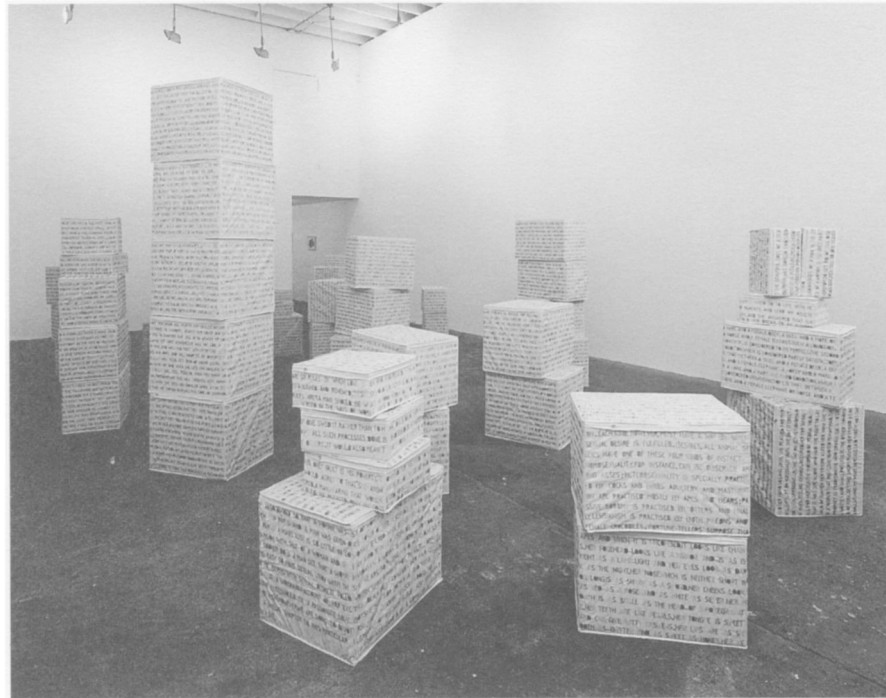


Figure 3. Ghada Amer, *The Encyclopaedia of Pleasure*, 2001. Fifty-four cardboard boxes, embroidery on canvas. Dimensions varied. Courtesy of the artist and Deitch Projects; photograph by Tom Powel Imaging.

But avoid a forty year old woman for she is a misfortune.
Verily, it is tiring to have
Lasting company with women.¹⁰

Other chapters Amer copies carry titles such as “On the praiseworthy aesthetic qualities of women,” “On women’s desire for coition,” and “On the advantages of a nonvirgin over a virgin.”

The explicitness of some of these texts parallels that of Amer’s masturbating nudes, which she culled from Western pornographic magazines. Serially repeated, and thereby suggesting mechanical manufacture, Amer’s nudes desecrate the idea of the individual implicit in the Abstract Expressionist art that these works visually echo. Her texts, too, are mechanically reproduced; honor the lewd in a golden script; and transgress the grand aspirations of calligraphy, its range of styles, and cult of

beauty. Produced by a team of assistants in Cairo and New York the *Encyclopaedia* testifies to a range of broken traditions both Eastern and Western.

Amer interferes in the visual language of the West and in the calligraphic traditions of Islamic cultures. Armed with minimalist regimentation and predictable repetition she disrupts the gesturally free art of Abstract Expressionism. The minimalist tool itself is dismantled by the use of its nemesis, the figuration of the body. Amer pursues a similar strategy with her texts. Debased into printed scripts, shaggily or mechanically executed, they commit the pleasures of the body to the print, and deflate the aesthetic pretensions of calligraphy.

Amer, however, strikes her blows from within the cocoon of tradition. Just as she maintains the appearance of Abstract Expressionism or Minimalism while eroding their tenets from inside, she engages in embroidery without espousing its innocence, and invokes the canon of calligraphy while narrating what remains unspeakable and what calligraphers would find unwritable. Subversion escalates in her work from the aesthetic to the cultural. Operating within the

10. Abul Hasan ‘Ali Ibn al-Katib, *The Encyclopaedia of Pleasure*, Salah addin Khawwam, ed. Adnan Jarkas and Salah addin Khawwam, trans. (Toronto, Ontario: Aleppo Publishing, 1977), p. 214. Photocopy of this manuscript given to the author courtesy of Ghada Amer.

boundaries of a variety of different traditions, Amer ultimately exerts a simultaneous attachment to and distance from them.

Shahzia Sikander

Shahzia Sikander, like Amer, is detached from local parochialism, wherever in the world it occurs. She lets herself blend with traditions and in doing so perverts them, erasing their boundaries and affirming the undesirability of hierarchies, limits, and polarized separations. Sikander, who now lives in New York, was born in Lahore, Pakistan, where she obtained a B.F.A. in studying the art of the miniature. At the time this pictorial language was considered moribund and survived degenerately as kitsch. It was an anomaly in Pakistan and irrelevant to any modernist discourse. With Sikander, though, miniature painting attains a new, global status. Manipulated, its codes transgressed, it is resuscitated not to survive in isolation but to befriend, contaminate, and challenge the course of another tradition: the art of the West. Whether retaining its traditionally intimate format and paper support or enlarged to mural scale, intermixed with photographs, or even digitized, it always remains detectable as miniature painting even though it is never uniquely of Islamic origin.

From the vast pool of miniature styles available to her, Sikander scans idioms from the Hindu to the Muslim, from India to Iran. She has studied India's indigenous Rajput painting, dominated by subjects from Hindu myth, and also its Mughal painting, Islamic in origin, more concerned with temporal and historical events, and more naturalistic in style. Beyond India, she has looked at the Safavids in Iran—contemporaries of the Mughals and of paramount importance to the development of Mughal art in the sixteenth century. The Mughal ruler Humayun took refuge at the court of his cousin, Shah Tahmasp, in Tabriz, and when he returned to India he took with him two of Persia's finest artists. Tabriz was also a training school for Humayun's successor, Akbar, who in the 1580s moved his capital from Kabul to Lahore.

Sikander's *Mirrat I* (1991–1992; fig. 4) is among her early attempts to graft disparate idioms. Kangra miniature painting, in itself a cross-fertilized hybrid of Hindu mythology and Mughal naturalism, provided the perfect source for her early interest in disclaiming homogeneity. In this work Sikander addresses the themes of romantic love, revolving around Krishna, that characterize Kangra painting, but she omits the divine,



Figure 4. Shahzia Sikander, *Mirrat I*, 1991–1992. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, gold leaf, and tea on hand-prepared paper, 11 x 8". Courtesy of the artist.

except indirectly in the depiction of peacocks, the traditional companions of the love god.¹¹ Executed in Lahore, where according to the artist Muslim Mughal paintings were available but Hindu Kangra paintings were not,¹² Sikander takes the Hindu myth and turns it into a contemporary reality: the protagonist was a friend of hers, the Mughal architecture a fort in her native Lahore. The frame, a purely ornamental matter, remains traditional. The work accordingly oscillates among aesthetic systems: the perspectival structure is Western, the framing border is Arabesque, the portraiture is contemporary and realistic, the convention of repetition—

11. See M. S. Randhawa, *Kangra Paintings on Love* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1962).

12. Interview with the author.

the simultaneous representation of separate moments within a narrative—is Hindu. In the process of making these combinations Sikander fuses the anticipation of love as experienced by her friend in real life with its nostalgic representation in Hindu art. These mixed codes belie Western realism just as they defy the traditional spirit of miniature painting, which is rarely an index of mundane realities but lies somewhat closer to fairy tales,¹³ even when it attempts to capture the shadows and gravity of the real world. Even at this early juncture in her artistic career, Sikander was conceptually distancing herself from her craft, creating a kind of parody of the miniature.¹⁴

At this stage, however, craft still superseded concept, and Sikander maintained a traditional meticulousness of execution throughout the picture. Later, when she moved to the United States, this unified treatment broke down, perhaps an indication of Sikander's refusal to be typecast as a predictable exotic entity. The new vision might have been fueled by personal experience related to her ethnicity. Studying for her M.F.A. at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1993–1995, she was confronted for the first time with a perception of herself that confined her within a framework: the “Muslim woman.” It was at RISD that she wore the veil for the first time, in a performance not unlike Amer's, and watched people's reactions. The performance was ephemeral but the notion of the veil has persisted in her work, both literally and conceptually.

It first appears in *Separate Working Things II* (1993–1995; fig. 5), a miniature that Sikander executed with precision and high finish only to violate it with a loose, unrefined vocabulary, an almost graffiti-like mode of mark making so that a detailed realism vies for attention with an abstract voiceover. The generic landscape is defaced with transparent, ghostlike creatures, some Indian and recognizable (one figure silhouetted against the architecture faintly echoes the portraits of Shah Jahan), some fictional, or purely abstract. A number of these, a clustered composite of human and animal forms, have taken refuge under what appears to be an intimation of the veil—not a dark, ominous shroud, and not opaque but shredded into flowing white strings. Another figure on the periphery wears a veil as a windswept wedding crown. This

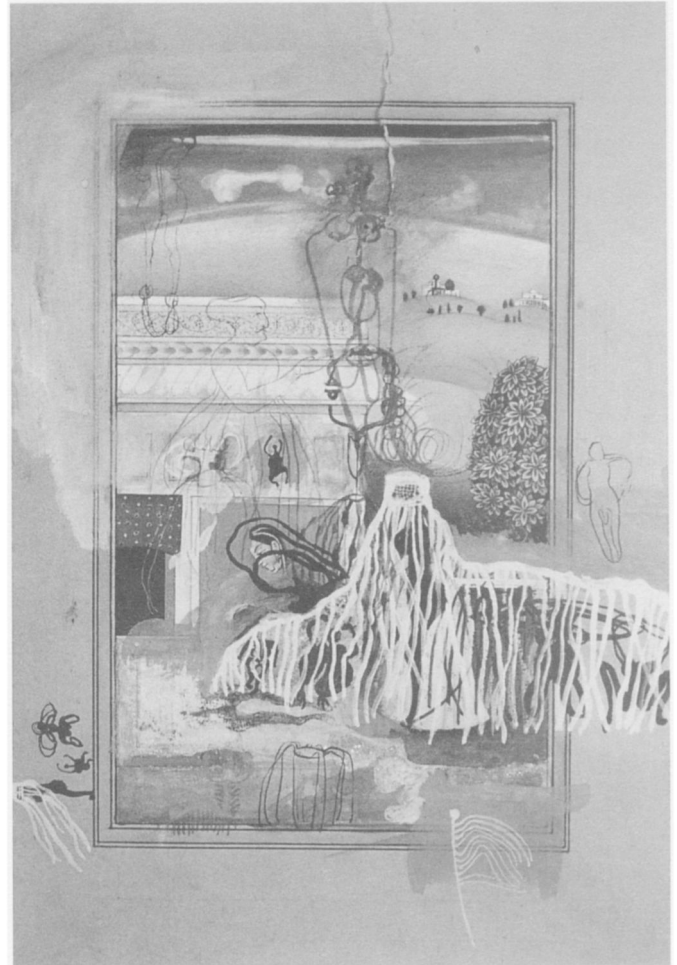


Figure 5. Shahzia Sikander, *Separate Working Things II*, 1993–1995. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, tea on hand-prepared “wasli” paper, 10 x 7”. Whereabouts unknown.

transparent all-over layering, reminiscent of the work of Sigmar Polke, supports an iconography also centered on levels of opacity and transparency, in other words on the concealing and revealing properties of the veil.

It is in a light note that Sikander introduces the veil. She does not dwell on it. The picture is mostly about a certain kind of tension, the contrapuntal relation of differing modes of expression. But Sikander does not lose sight of the veil. In other works such as *Who's Veiled Anyway* (1994–1997) she throws it on a polo player, a familiar character in Persian miniatures.¹⁵ In

13. It is not surprising that Shahzia Sikander would eventually turn for her themes to Western fairy tales such as the story of Red Riding Hood.

14. Zahoor-ul-Ikhlaq is another conceptual painter from Pakistan who, like Sikander, has deconstructed traditional miniatures.

15. For illustration, see Shahzia Sikander (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1998), pl. 20.



Figure 6. Shahzia Sikander, *Perilous Order*, 1997. Vegetable pigment, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea-water on paper, 10 3/8 x 8 3/16". Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchased with funds from the Drawing Committee.

those, however, the rider is always a male; Sikander switches genders, letting her female polo player gallop freely in this Safavid-inspired miniature.¹⁶ Another example appears in the “Extraordinary Realities Series I” (1996)—originally a readymade miniature made for tourists Sikander found in a Houston market—in which she includes a picture of herself wearing a red bridal veil, an Indo-Pakistani custom.¹⁷ In every case the veil resists a fixed interpretation as a sign of repression. Not necessarily filtered through the Islamic religion, it is multifaceted, becoming a sign and metaphor for fluctuating meanings.

The process of layering and hybridity, part and parcel of the same vision, reaches a new level in *Perilous Order* (1997; fig. 6). The female figures in this image are plucked from a Basohli painting, an early eighteenth-century illustration of the Bhagavata Purana, showing maidens whose clothes Krishna has stolen.¹⁸ These naked women flutter around a male figure, a friend of the artist, who is portrayed as a Mughal prince or ruler. Among these Hindu, Islamic, and contemporary references Sikander inserts the shadow of an invented figure often recurring in her work, and completes the image with regimented dots conveying a Minimalist grid.

This signature image of an uprooted but self-nourishing female is of special interest in the hybrid scenarios Sikander concocts. Always hovering in transit, she is an alter ego. Barely sketched out in the left corner of *Separate Working Things II*, included but made of shadows in *Perilous Order*, she is fully present in *Fleshy Weapons* (1997), and voluptuously modeled as a multiarmed goddess.¹⁹ Half naked, half veiled, Hindu-Muslim hybrid, wishful invention, mutation, the figure in *Fleshy Weapons* reflects the artist's profound desire to erase boundaries, preach fusion, merge adversaries, and intimately link differences.²⁰ Purity and homogeneity have no place in Sikander's vision; she is no accomplice to the exotic vision of a woman

excluded, dismissed, and banished under a veil. Instead she expands the associations of the veil, lacing it with humor in miniatures, layering it into installations as translucent sheets of paper, multiplying its incarnations from representation to ethereal abstraction.

Shirazeh Houshiary

Unlike Sikander, Shirazeh Houshiary buries every point of departure that might define an origin. “I set out to capture my breath,” she says, to “find the essence of my own existence, transcending name, nationality, cultures.”²¹ Born in Shiraz, Iran, Houshiary enrolled at the Chelsea School of Art in 1976 and has lived in London ever since. Presented as a figurehead for new British art in the 1980s and then pressured to do the same for Iranian art in the identity-driven exhibitions of the 1990s, she shunned categorizations and withdrew from events that would have cast her in their light. Unconcerned with gender or ethnicity, perpetually trying to move beyond, she seeks a passage to a condition free of divisions, a space shared by all humanity. Yet she is profoundly sustained in this quest by Eastern mysticism, and specifically Sufism, which has allowed her to propose paradoxes and conquer them, dismantle binary thoughts, merge the spiritual with the scientific, and test and overcome easy categorizations and conceptual ghettos.²²

The process of taming polarities, paradoxically, begins with polarities. For instance, in *Licit Shadow* (1992–1993; fig. 7), a series of sculptures in six parts, Houshiary draws formal vocabularies from diverse and specific origins, then lets them flow into a common geometry. The grid structures and serial productions of Minimalism come to mind, but only to provide a nest for honeycomb patterns that may hark back to the *muqarnas* of Islamic architecture. The materials, ranging from lead to gold, carry their own hierarchical symbolism, referring to the alchemic struggle to overcome base matter. The juxtaposition of the cold, dead weight of the cube with flickers of bright copper and gold create further antagonisms within a cohabitation in which Houshiary above all attempts to breathe life into the rigid will of

16. In information given to the author Sikander explained her source to be the *Polo Player*, a 1642 Safavid miniature from Riza-I Abbasi Album, illustrated in Esin Atil. *The Brush of the Masters: Drawings from Iran and India*. (Washington D.C.: The Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1978), p. 78.

17. For illustration, see *Shahzia Sikander*, (see note 15) pl. 10.

18. For an illustration of the source, see M[ohindar] S[ingh] Randhawa, *Basohli Painting* (Calcutta: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1959), pl. 9.

19. For illustration, see *Shahzia Sikander*, (see note 15) pl. 3.

20. On a discussion regarding the “nearness of difference” see “Chillava Klatch: Shahzia Sikander Interviewed by Homi Bhabha,” in *Shahzia Sikander*, (see note 15) pp. 16–21.

21. Shirazeh Houshiary, quoted in Ann Barclay Morgan, “From Form to Formlessness: A conversation with Shirazeh Houshiary,” *Sculpture* 19, no. 6 (July–August 2000), pp. 26–27.

22. On Houshiary and Islamic and Sufi thought and symbolism, see Jeremy Lewison, “Light of Darkness,” in *Isthmus: Shirazeh Houshiary* (Grenoble, Munich, Maastricht: The British Council, 1995), pp. 65–92.

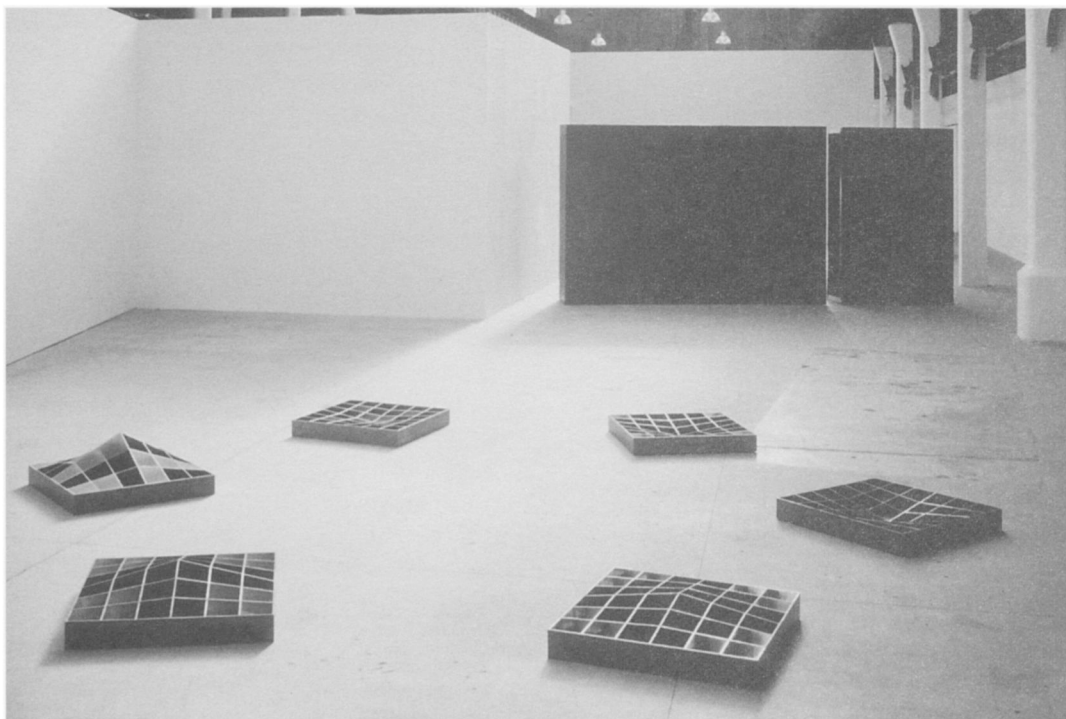


Figure 7. Shirazeh Houshiary, *Licit Shadow*, 1992–1993. Lead, copper, and gold leaf; six parts, dimensions varied. Weltkunst collection, Switzerland. Installation view at Le Magasin, Grenoble. Photograph by Georg Rehsteiner.

the geometry. By stretching outward and compressing inward the cores of her structures, she hints at the pulmonary rhythms of expansion and contraction. The sense of breathing remains central to Houshiary's iconography.

With time, the dualities in her work have blended into more seamless wholes. Site-specific brick sculptures such as *Loom* (2000; fig. 8), for example, once again point to both an icon of modernism—Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1937–1938)—and Islamic architecture, with its earthbound tomb towers or soaring minarets. Among the latter, the Malwiya (848/49–852), the “snail shell” or ramped minaret tower of the Great Mosque of al-Mutawakkil, in Samarra, stands out as a possible antecedent.²³ The feeling of simultaneous lightness and weight, previously conveyed through materials, here emanates from the sense of corkscrew rotation, which seems at once to be tightening its grip on the earth and whirling to be released from it.

23. For illustrations of both the Great Mosque and *muqarnas*, see John D. Hoag, *Islamic Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), pp. 54–55, 108, 157, 257.

A gyrating, spiral movement like this one reverberates in Sufi rituals such as the dance of the whirling dervishes, in which the dance is intended to lead to a state of altered consciousness, a surpassing of the self. The movement in Houshiary's *Loom*, then, is simultaneously downward and inward, upward and outward. In visual terms it also relates directly to the double helix, the twinned spirals of genetic material encapsulated in DNA. Fusing the artistic vocabularies of East and West, *Loom* also weaves spirituality and science into a tightly unified expression.

Houshiary's monochrome paintings go still farther in communicating the meeting of opposites, the commingling of cultures, the acceptance of not only all but also none in particular—a process leading to a new order which is neither Islamic nor modernist but something new to both. The imagery of the paintings may be traced back to the works in graphite on paper, mounted on aluminum, that she executed in the early 1990s.²⁴ Soon after, in 1993, she moved from paper to

24. For illustrations see *Dancing around my ghost: Shirazeh Houshiary* (London: Camden Arts Center; Dublin: The Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1993).

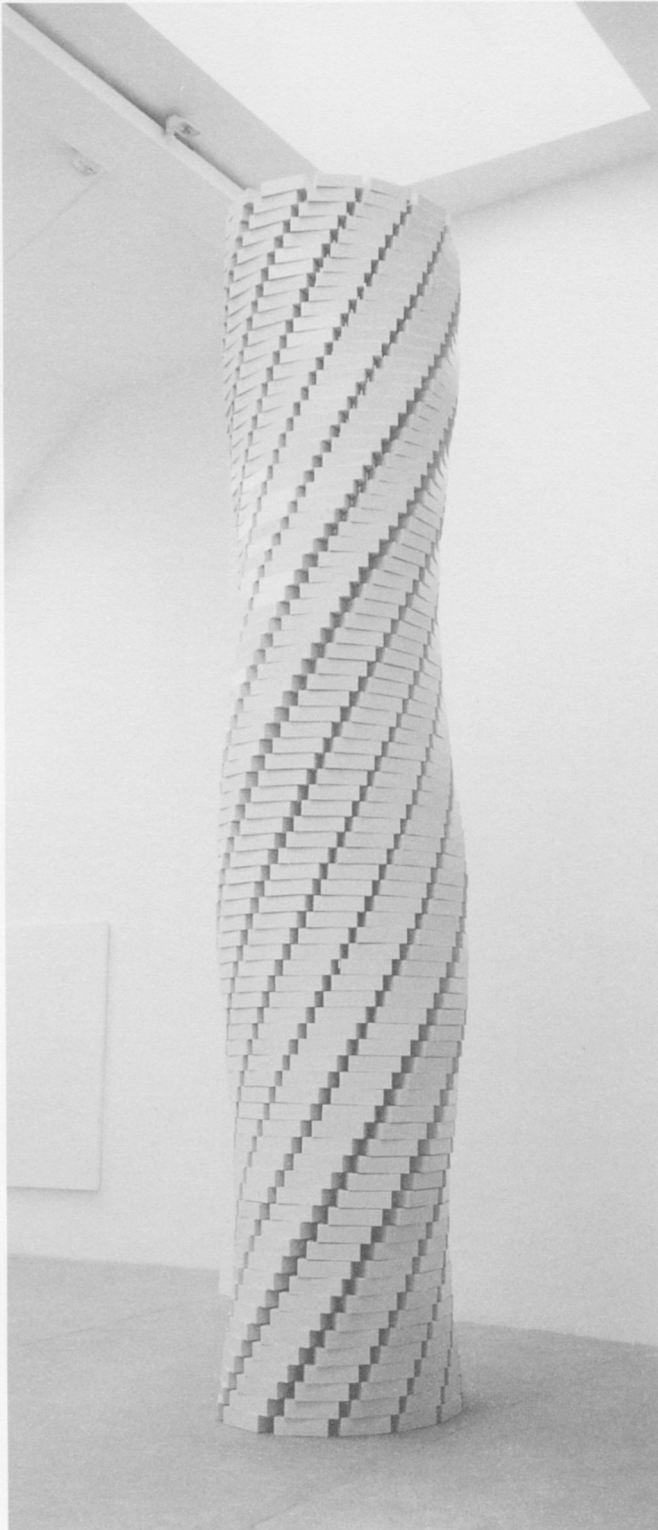


Figure 8. Shirazeh Houshiary, *Loom*, 2000. Glazed brick. 17'3" x 43". Courtesy of the Lisson Gallery, London. Photograph by Dave Morgan.

canvas, working on top of a canvas she laid on the floor, a position loaded with history in that it recalls the balletic choreographies of gestures performed by the New York School artist Jackson Pollock. Houshiary, on the other hand, moves with the meticulousness and intimacy of a miniature painter.

The earlier drawings show the marks of Arabic calligraphy. In the paintings too, Houshiary begins by tracing a word whose identity she does not divulge, preferring to keep the mystery of its origin. Then in a process of detachment she dissolves form and meaning through repetition—a device central to both Western Minimalist practice and to *zikr*, a Sufi method of meditation. Alternating writing with erasure, or veiling the writing with color, Houshiary moves from form to formlessness, from the word to the unutterable, from legibility to invisibility, from text to an abstraction bearing an activity's generalized trace. *Presence* (2000; fig. 9)—a painting in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art—at first sight resembles a blank canvas painted a monochrome white, then intimates a horizontal shadow when viewed from a distance, a web of barely visible cracks when scrutinized up close. The form looks like an accident of nature more than the product of intense manual labor. Houshiary's paintings are elusive, barely visible, and they change in our vision over time—they refuse to be frozen into a finite moment, of the kind that could be captured by a camera. They intentionally stand at the very edge of perception, the signs both emerging from nothingness and simultaneously melting back into it. Yet these paintings painstakingly record a process of obstinate mark making, of personal gestures inscribing time, of checking the pressure of one's presence, the precision of one's vision, against the resistant surface. It is as if Houshiary were trying to capture the self in its least material form, as force, breath, or energy. What remains is the ghost of the activity.

Ideas of the transcendence of the self appear in Sufism, which also deals with its annihilation, and reemergence transformed, through the twin concepts of *fanā* and *baqā*.²⁵ Like a Sufi's quest for the divine, Houshiary's apparent self-effacement is founded on grand ambition. It encompasses the sublime while engaging the material. It is within this circular spectrum that the works reveal their mystical foundations, while also pointing to the Western monochrome tradition. Restricted mostly to the colors of night and day—

25. See Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

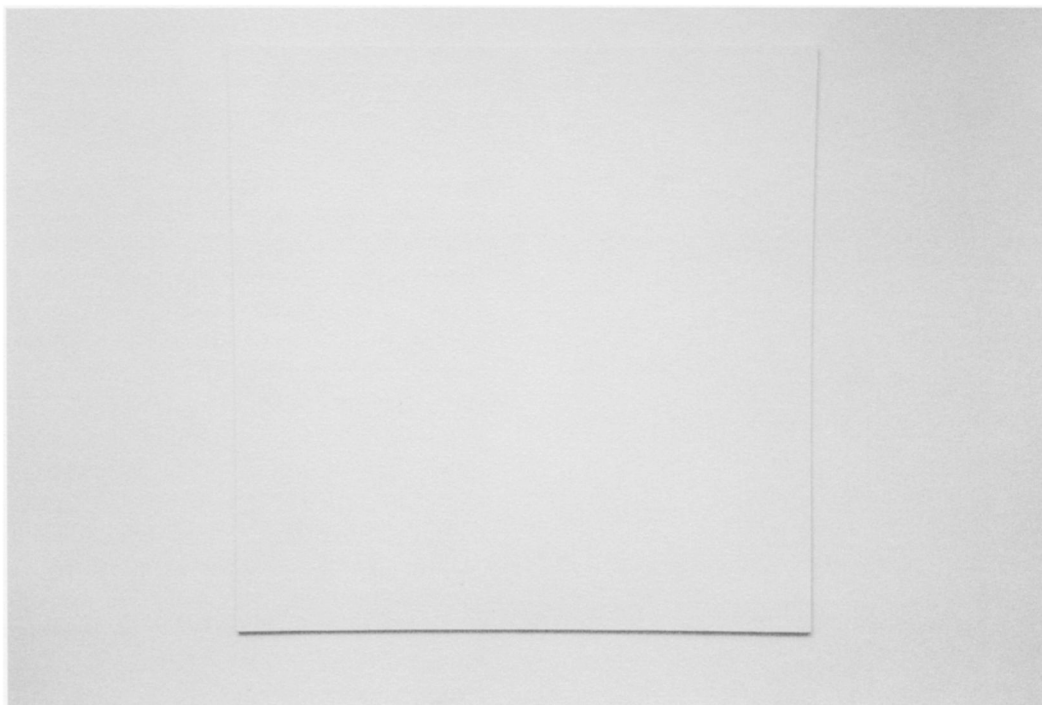


Figure 9. Shirazeh Houshiary, *Presence*, 2000. White acqua, silverpoint and graphite on canvas, 6'1" x 6'1". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds. Photograph by Dave Morgan.

another opposition Houshiary complicates by drawing light into darkness and casting shadows on the pristine whiteness of her canvases—the paintings set up a zigzagging sequence of references, from the white monochromes of Robert Rauschenberg, which do not demand attention as precious objects, to those of Robert Ryman, which relish their materiality, to the spiritual dimension of modernist abstraction, beginning with Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich and moving on to Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt. Silencing the calligraphic element of the text, Houshiary veils its Islamic origin but turns up the volume of a transcendental message. And to the roster of modernist abstraction she adds a visual conundrum whose building blocks are words.

If there is anything these three artists share, it is their refusal to inhabit a ghetto either Western or Islamic. They have invented new orders alien to both. Amer's work relates to translation, which exists in a space between and above different cultures. Sikander's is a melting pot accommodating a spectrum of shades; and Houshiary's suggests an amniotic fluid, a stage prior to and beyond differences, in which everyone finds something they can recognize—the pulse of life, the

trace of a self, something akin to the visualization of human presence. The signposts leading these artists to new territories and destinations are both Eastern (and not only Islamic) and Western (modernist). It may well be their nomadic condition—premised on both intimacy and distance, from the self and from others—that has given Amer, Sikander, and Houshiary the wisdom and the ability to step beyond the cocoons of both their native cultures and their host countries. Their work allows us a glimpse of a rapprochement still unfulfilled at the dawn of the third millennium.